



Mauritania

International Religious Freedom Report 2006

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The constitution establishes the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the religion of its citizens and the state. However, a military junta took power on August 3, 2005, overthrew the elected president, dissolved parliament, suspended parts of the constitution, and formed a transitional government. The transitional government maintained laws regarding human rights and religious freedom and made some advances in both areas. Both the former and transitional governments limited freedom of religion by prohibiting the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials and the proselytization of Muslims.

There were some changes in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

The generally amicable relationship among religious groups in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 419,212 square miles, and its population is approximately 3 million. Almost the entire population practiced Sunni Islam. There was a very small number of non-Muslims and Roman Catholic or denominational Christian churches in Nouakchott, Atar, Zouerate, Nouadhibou, and Rosso. Although there were no synagogues, a very small number of expatriates practiced Judaism.

There were several foreign faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) active in humanitarian and developmental work in the country. The largest was World Vision, involved in food and other aid projects. Other NGOs included World Advocates and Caritas, each providing various services including the provision of medical care, feeding centers, micro-finance and water treatment.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution establishes the country as an Islamic republic and recognizes Islam as the religion of its citizens and the state. Both the former and transitional governments limited freedom of religion by prohibiting the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials and the proselytization of Muslims; however, non-Muslim resident expatriates and a few non-Muslim citizens generally practiced their religions openly and freely.

Both the former and transitional governments and citizenry consider Islam to be the essential cohesive element unifying the country's various ethnic groups. There is a cabinet-level Ministry of Literacy Programs, Islamic Orientation, and Traditional Education. The High Council of Islam, consisting of six imams, advised the former and transitional governments on the conformance of legislation to Islamic precepts. Although the former and transitional governments provided a small stipend to the imam of the Central Mosque in the capital, mosques and Qur'anic schools were normally supported by their members and other donors.

The former and transitional governments did not register religious groups; however, secular NGOs, including humanitarian and development NGOs affiliated with religious groups, must register with the Ministry of the Interior. Nonprofit organizations, including both religious groups and secular NGOs, generally are not subject to taxation. The judiciary consists of a single system of courts with a modernized legal system that conforms with the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law).

The former and transitional governments observed Muslim holy days as national holidays, but this practice did not negatively affect other religious groups. A magistrate of Shari'a, who heads a separate government commission, determines the lunar dates for observing religious holidays and addresses the nation on these days.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The implementation of Islamic law has created some limited restrictions on religious freedom. Shari'a, proclaimed the law of the land under a previous government in 1983, includes the Qur'anic prohibition against apostasy or conversion to a religion other than Islam; however, this prohibition had never been codified in civil law or enforced. The small number of known converts from Islam suffered no social ostracism, and there were no reports of societal or governmental attempts to punish them during the period covered by this report.

Although there is no specific legal prohibition against proselytizing by non-Muslims, in practice the former government prohibited such activity through the use of Article 11 of the Press Act. The act bans the publication of any material that is against, contradicts, or otherwise threatens Islamic principles. The former government viewed any attempts by practitioners of other religions to convert Muslims as undermining society. The transitional government effectively suspended Article 11 in April 2006 as part of its effort to liberalize the press. However, the article's suspension was not seen as a move to increase religious freedoms, and the transitional government continued to prohibit the distribution of non-Islamic religious materials and the proselytization of Muslims. Foreign faith-based NGOs limit their activities to humanitarian and development assistance.

Under Article 11, the former government could restrict the importation, printing, or public distribution of Bibles or other non-Islamic religious literature. In practice, Bibles were neither printed nor publicly sold in the country; however, the possession of Bibles and other non-Islamic religious materials in private homes was not illegal, and Bibles and other religious publications were available among the small non-Islamic communities.

Except for the president, the members of the five-person Constitutional Council, and the ten-person High Council of Magistrates over which the president presides, government employees or members of the ruling political party are not required to take a religious oath. The Constitutional Council and the High Council of Magistrates advise the president in matters of law and the constitution. The oath of office includes a promise to God to uphold the law of the land in conformity with Islamic precepts. However, since the August 2005 coup, the country has not had a president or an active Constitutional Council. Instead, the Military Council for Justice and Democracy, headed by Colonel Ely Ould Mohammed Fal, has held power. In April 2006 the council approved certain constitutional amendments that were overwhelmingly approved by voters in a national constitutional referendum held June 25. One amendment established a presidential oath of office taken in the name of God.

Both the privately run Qur'anic schools and the Government's public schools include classes on religion. These classes teach the history and principles of Islam and the classical Arabic of the Qur'an. Although attendance at these religious classes is ostensibly required, many students, the great majority of whom were Muslims, decline to attend them for diverse ethnolinguistic and religious reasons. Since these classes determine a disproportionately small percentage of the overall grade, students are able to advance in school and graduate with diplomas, provided they compensate for their failure to attend the religion classes by their performance in other classes.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Following the 2003 crackdown on Islamic activists, the former government closed a number of Saudi-funded and Gulf-funded Islamic schools and charities. These organizations remained closed at the end of the period covered by this report. The former government also closed an Islamic charity association in 2003 for its alleged connections to local Islamic activists. The government-funded Institute for Islamic Science, Studies, and Research (ISERI), remained open and fully funded.

From March to July of 2005, the former government detained approximately eighty Islamists, including Islamist leaders Cheikh Mohamed El Hacem Ould Dedew and Moctar Ould Mohamed Moussa, who it claimed were tied to terrorism. On May 28, 2005, the former government charged thirty-seven with membership in unrecognized groups or for inciting violence and making harmful political statements at mosques. The former government released fourteen others, leaving sixty-six in prison (thirty-seven of whom had been charged). A majority of the arrests appeared to be based on alleged political activities rather than religious beliefs. The transitional government released twenty-one of the sixty-six Islamists soon after assuming power, and on September 2, 2005, released an additional twenty-four for lack of evidence, leaving twenty-one in prison. Three prisoners escaped April 27, 2006, leaving eighteen in prison. The transitional government stated that it had sufficient evidence to hold the remaining eighteen for terrorist activities and was preparing its case against them at the end of the reporting period.

Unlike in the previous reporting period, there were no reports of former or transitional government officials searching mosques, seizing Qur'anic texts or arresting mosque officials. As in the previous reporting period, both the former and transitional governments restricted the use of mosque loudspeakers exclusively for the call to prayer and Friday service, in accordance with a 2003 law that prohibits the use of mosques for any form of political activity, including the distribution of propaganda and incitement to violence.

In late 2005 a western citizen was arrested and detained for forty-eight hours by transitional government authorities for distributing non-Islamic religious materials to citizens. Several weeks after his release the individual was rearrested for continued possession of non-Islamic religious materials and was expelled from the country.

As in the previous reporting period, after police told four small Protestant groups to stop meeting in members' homes until they received official recognition, the transitional government continued to restrict such meetings.

There were some instances where persons were detained for questioning in connection with an investigation into proselytizing, but they were released within days without charges.

No non-Islamic groups have ever been recognized, including the Catholic Church, which operates openly in its facility in Nouakchott.

Shari'a law provides the legal principles upon which the country's law and legal procedure are based. The testimony of two women is necessary to equal that of one man. In addition, in awarding an indemnity to the family of a woman who has been killed, the courts grant only half the amount that they would award for a man's death. For commercial and other issues not addressed specifically by Shari'a, the law and courts treat women and men equally.

Excluding the Islamists previously mentioned, there were no additional reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. There were no reported incidents of interreligious violence during this period. Unlike in the previous reporting period, there were no reports of public protests conducted against the Government's continued recognition of Israel. However, such protests were planned for July 2 and 4, 2006.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. government discussed religious freedom issues with the former and transitional governments as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

The U.S. embassy monitors developments affecting religious freedom and maintains contact with imams and the leaders of other religious groups. These contacts include the Minister of Islamic Orientation, Literacy Programs, and Traditional Education.

The U.S. ambassador actively engages prominent religious leaders in a dialogue to broaden mutual understanding of religious freedom principles and to explain the freedom with which Muslims practice their religion in America.

As part of its continuing efforts to promote religious tolerance, the embassy brought an American imam to the country for a week-long visit in January and February 2006. During his visit the imam met with several civil and religious leaders to discuss how Islam is practiced freely in the United States. As part of his visit, the imam was invited to participate as a keynote speaker at a conference to promote dialogue and understanding within the Islamic community. The ambassador continues to meet frequently with many different Islamic leaders to promote dialogue. The embassy also has expanded its outreach efforts to Qur'anic schools.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](#)